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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 001810

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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN-CONTROLLED MEDIA ELECTION COVERAGE
EMPHASIZES DEMOCRACY, OPENNESS, AND PROCESS

REF: A. TASHKENT 1732

Classified By: POLOFF STEVEN PROHASKA FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: In recent weeks, Uzbek media coverage and official statements have extolled democratic principles while the election field has grown to an unprecedented six candidates that include Uzbekistan's first female and "independent" presidential candidates, though we doubt that President Karimov's current competitors are any more than puppets. The media coverage and candidate pool probably are a public relations exercise and reflect a GOU campaign to manage international perceptions in the runup to the December presidential election. Karimov still has not accepted the nomination for the presidency. End Summary.

Media Coverage Stresses Democracy, Openness of Elections

12. (SBU) Unsurprisingly, recent media portrayals have painted the election in a very favorable light, with the Uzbek TV First Channel running a program called "Elections as a Mirror of Democracy." Those interviewed lauded their "right to elect" and the democratic principles guiding Uzbekistan's political processes. Uzbek media has also emphasized election processes heavily over party platforms, and party officials rather than presidential candidates have generally issued statements.

13. (SBU) Chairman of Uzbekistan's Central Electoral Commission (CEC), Mirzaulugbek Abdusalamov, publicly stated on October 16 that holding the election showed the world Uzbekistan's commitment to the Constitution and democratic development. Abdusalamov also said that an agreement with the media on impartial coverage of the election and the CEC's website (www.elections.uz) promote transparency and openness. (Comment: Embassy has attempted to monitor this website for the past several weeks, and it appears, strangely, to be blocked.) The CEC intends to announce all registered candidates by November 23. Members of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan met with a representative of the CEC on October 18, threatening legal action if Karimov is elected to an unconstitutional third term, but we are not aware of any CEC response to these statements yet.

Still Planning to Invite OSCE Election Monitors?

14. (SBU) On September 18, the head of the CEC announced that OSCE monitors would be invited to observe the election, and the GOU wanted to demonstrate Uzbekistan's "open and democratic" election. Nevertheless, on October 17 a representative from the OSCE told us that the organization had not yet received a formal GOU invitation to observe the presidential election.

Election Features Some "Firsts"

15. (SBU) With six CEC-approved candidates so far, Uzbekistan's presidential field is far wider than has been the case in previous presidential elections--Karimov had only one challenger in each of the 1991 and 2000 elections--and includes two other "firsts." An initiative group of 300 citizens has nominated Akmal Saidov, the head of the Legislative Chamber's Committee for Democratic Institutions, making Saidov the first "independent" candidate to run for the presidency of Uzbekistan. Dilorom Tashmukhamedova of the Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party is the first woman to run for the presidency of the country.

Comment

16. (C) We suspect that this year's relatively large candidate field--as well as frequent statements about the value of the law and democratic principles--is a GOU attempt to manage

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international perceptions and create the semblance of a competitive election. The GOU appears to have hand-picked these candidates (ref A), as it has done in previous elections. It is possible that the number of candidates could grow further before the end of November; rumors suggest, for example, that the Uzbek-born Russian billionaire Alisher Usmanov could run, but there has been no official corroboration of this, and his Russian citizenship would seem to preclude it (septel). Official statements on the importance of the democratic process and a fair election tracks with years of GOU rhetoric about the importance of democracy, and the GOU is probably hoping to curry favor with Western countries and entities such as the EU and the OSCE to give Karimov's presidency greater legitimacy. Karimov has remained coy about his intentions, however, and to date has not accepted the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan's nomination for the presidency.

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